

pages, is a selection from the infinite number of facts in the past. A history of a whole nation in one volume, like this, is of necessity even more selective. Therefore, in addition to confining myself to those aspects of the past which bear on the present, I have also limited myself to the history of Americans as a people. There is little in this book about great men or individual genius, except where such men embody the values and aspirations of the whole people. The work and thought of many American thinkers, artists, scientists, and statesmen are therefore ignored, not because they are unimportant, but because to have included them would have made this something other than a history of the shaping of the American people.

In current historical writing it is fashionable to look to economic and social forces for the explanation of the movement and direction of history. Certainly this approach is more sophisticated than attributing the course of history to the actions of a few great men. But at the same time it seems to ignore a force in history which this book seeks to emphasize—the role of ideas. And by ideas I mean the beliefs, assumptions, and values of the people rather than the great ideas of thinkers which form the basis of formal intellectual history. Because, for example, Americans cherished ideas like freedom, equality, and Christian justice, they acted to realize them; in doing so, they changed the course of their history.

Karl Marx and other writers of the nineteenth century made a luminous contribution to the understanding of human history when they were able to show that men's ideas bore a close relation to the socioeconomic context in which they flourished; that, for example, the poetry of a pastoral people is filled with pastoral imagery, that an industrial society extols free labor. But this insight is often betrayed by the careless conclusions drawn from it. It is one thing to see connections between ideas and the economy and quite another to assume that all ideas must necessarily be but pale reflections of economic interests and the mode of production. One cardinal assumption in this book is that ideas have a life of their own, regardless of their origin. And by "a life of their own" I mean that men defend or oppose ideas for reasons not always related to their immediate self-interest, or to the socioeconomic character of their society.

The truth of this, it seems to me, arises out of the nature of man himself. Admittedly, men are animals and, in common with other beasts, have powerful drives toward food, self-preservation, and sex, none of which can be easily denied or sublimated. On these in-

OUT OF OUR PAST

*The Forces That Shaped
Modern America*

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REVISED EDITION

CARL N. DEGLER

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To Catherine,
who endlessly read it,
and to Paul and Suzanne,
who endlessly heard about it.

*“Nor for the past alone—for
meanings to the future.”*

WALT WHITMAN

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Preface to the First Edition

WHEN the historian sits down to write about the past, there are always several approaches open to him. The one most commonly taken might be called descriptive history, in which the story of what happened in the past is told as accurately and minutely as research, literary style, and the space available will permit. Insofar as it is possible, the events of the past are presented as they took place; small effort is made to distinguish between those events which have relevance to the present and those which have little. The primary purpose is to recreate the past as nearly as possible, not to draw morals or to uncover guides for the present.

That is not the approach taken here. To put it simply, this book seeks an answer to the question "How did Americans get to be the way they are in the middle of the twentieth century?" In other words, the multitudinous events of the American past are here seen through the lens of the present. Admittedly, much of the material usually included in the story of America is missing in such an approach. Readers should be warned that they will find nothing here on the Presidential administrations between 1868 and 1901, no mention of the American Indians or the settlement of the seventeenth-century colonies; the War of 1812 is touched upon only in a footnote.

History viewed through the eyes of the present is understandably different from history written from the standpoint of the past. Persons and events which in other treatments might remain unnoticed or unappreciated now spring into focus. Therefore, in this book events and developments usually ignored or subordinated in standard accounts of American history now move to the center of the stage. For example, the history of the Negro in America figures prominently in three chapters, the rise and influence of the city dominate two, and the beginnings of American nationality in the colonial period come in for extended discussion.

All written history, no matter how slow its pace or numerous its